

CULTURE AND ANARCHY: FEDERAL SUPPORT FOR THE ARTS AND HUMANITIES

By M. E. Bradford

M. E. Bradford, professor of English at the University of Dallas, is the author of some 130 articles and reviews as well as an author or contributor to over a dozen books on history, literature, and political thought. He has taught at Hardin-Simmons University and the Northwestern State University of Louisiana, served several summers as a faculty member for the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and lectured on campuses throughout the country.

Dr. Bradford received his B.A. and M.A. degrees from the University of Oklahoma and his Ph.D. from Vanderbilt. He is a past president of the Southwestern American Literature Association and was a National Endowment for the Humanities Senior Research Fellow in 1977. He is a senior editor of Modern Age, a long-time regular contributor to National Review, and a writer or editorial board member for numerous other scholarly and popular journals.

Dr. Bradford delivered this paper at Hillsdale in October during the first Center for Constructive Alternatives Seminar of the 1981-82 year, entitled "Should the Government Subsidize the Arts and Humanities?"

I begin this discussion of federal support for the arts and humanities by acknowledging that I labor at a certain disadvantage in making even a restricted case for such expenditures. The *argumentum ad hominem* is against me—from the character of the likely recipients of such largesse. I must concede that in general artists and humanists* are difficult and in some ways unpleasant people. It is therefore not an easy task to persuade the ordinary citizen that his tax dollars should be spent in the forms of activity which, by reason of



training or ability, painters, poets, sculptors, scholars, dancers, and musicians prefer. Those of us who have received support too often take the entire process too lightly. The great debt goes on forever. Why should we not share in the dream of happiness for everyone at the expense of unborn generations? Since we are, to use Shelley's phrase concerning the poets, the "unacknowledged legislators of mankind" and our work is so important, when our friend the man of business grumbles about subsidizing studies in Faulkner's short fiction (my own project in 1977), we respond with condescension and reply that the *aristoi* of sensibility receive such benefactions by "natural right."

As a group, professors are probably *worse* than the standard caricature. We are indeed opinionated and argumentative. At the least provocation we appear on platform or TV, making sweeping statements on almost any subject, with a confidence proper only in the mes-

* What is meant by "humanists" in this essay does not suggest a religious position, but refers rather to scholars who practice one of the humanistic disciplines.

im•pri•mis (im-pri-mis) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin in primis, among the first (things)....

Imprimis is the journal of Hillsdale's two outreach programs seeking to foster clear thinking on the problems of our time: the Center for Constructive Alternatives in Michigan, and the Shavano Institute for National Leadership in Colorado. A subscription is free on request.

sengers of God, or a college freshman. On PBS we participate in "serious" discussions, occasionally puffing our pipes, telling those who listen and disagree how utterly foolish they are, and using our degrees to take the place of sound arguments as authority for our positions.

Even in social occasions we expect people to take notice when we pronounce. Sometimes we interrupt those wiser souls who laugh and talk about the important things—love, children, friends, and occupation—with a lecture on the early novels of Henry James or the Balkans during World War I. You can imagine the chaos that occurs at our own academic parties where everyone wants to talk endlessly of his or her own most recent hobbyhorse. A colleague has facetiously suggested that

but rather with *culture itself* and what government owes to its support in redressing the imbalance fostered by that government in its passion for utilitarian training and science.

It is, of course, true that we can make from a strict construction of the federal model *no* argument from definition for the National Endowments for the Arts and Humanities. The same thing can be said of federal support for education, federal research in botany and ichthyology, the Library of Congress, and the National Parks. But there is a greater difficulty connected with federal support of studies in the humanities, with programs designed to make available to the general public segments of American history or literature, or with



Hell must be like a protracted faculty meeting, with no hope of adjournment. Furthermore, as a group, professors are often eccentrically dressed and drive old, disreputable automobiles—some even worse than my '67 Chrysler Newport. A friend of mine, a full professor at a university in Georgia, was once asked by his dean to park his car around back so that it would not be seen by members of the community driving by. The same dean apologized to one of the governing board of the university for the number of books my friend had in his office. "He's a bibliophile," he told the trustee, implying the presence of an even more serious vice. All of you can add to this bill of particulars.

And if professors threaten the settled order of things, even worse can be said of the artists, who by their own tradition are set free to offend in the name of their own alienation against all that many of us cherish. The *poète maudit* has in our time evolved into the poet as barbarian, not only vulgar, but tendentious and confessional. Modern music is a cacophany turned in on itself in the excesses of its own theoretical apology. Modern painting and sculpture can at least be collected with an eye to profit, but are rarely enjoyed. All of this I readily concede. But it is beside the point in asking what should be the federal role in promoting the arts and humanities. For we should be concerned not with those who produce our cultural artifacts and the scholarly comment devoted to them, nor with the audience which they might serve,

performances in the arts, than there is with the collection of books or the crossbreeding of fish. For the humanities deal in questions of value and taste and not with those of quantity. How we are to interpret the American revolution, the War Between the States, Rousseau's *Social Contract*, and the fiction of Nathaniel Hawthorne is a matter of some delicacy, given our common commitment to pluralism. In our system, debate over the proper end of man, the *telos*, is conducted within society and is not decided by a plebiscite or court. As a people, Americans are politically united in a set of procedures, laws, and customs. And, like the Romans, by a common history—a collective memory which deters any would-be "second founders" from imposing upon us, from the top, a set of values organized into a doctrine or ideology.

The fear that the National Endowments might become an Orwellian Ministry of Culture authorized by federal fiat to impose some kind of democratic "Midcult" on our citizenry—a civil religion—has exercised Mr. Michael Mooney in his recent book on the subject. Though he overstates the danger posed by the Endowments in the present political atmosphere, his basic point concerning secular humanism is well-taken, most especially when we consider the use made during the tenure of Dr. Joseph D. Duffey at NEH, of the talk of "human values" and "deep needs" as a cover for a program of cultural populism generally conceived as a right to

cultural citizenship *qua* advice from the Endowment on the political issues of the day. One thinks here of grants given to the labor unions so that they might study their debt to the Democratic Party; to the Foreign Policy Association, so that it might promote SALT II; and to the United States Conference of Mayors, so that it might recommend Mr. Carter's energy policy to the favor of a recalcitrant electorate. Obviously, if they are to justify themselves, the National Endowments must eschew such programmatic topicality and show a greater respect for the given character of the regime which they serve.

The closest approximation to a Constitutional justification for the National Endowments exists with reference to the necessity for encouraging piety toward the

The more remote in its connection to the ancestral pieties any proposed activity of one of the National Endowments happens to be, the weaker the case that we can make for it with reference to the federal model. However, there are arguments which draw from the full course of our national history and from the present situation of artistic performance and humane learning in American civilization that amount to at least a plausible brief in behalf of certain types of federal funding.

The next most forceful pleading in behalf of the Endowments is the one to which I have already alluded, the need to correct the imbalance created by great sums spent on the sciences in the name of military necessity, medical advantage, progress, and pragmatism. In the



"American things" acknowledged by the Fathers of the Republic from its beginning in their writings, in their sponsorship of certain publications, in the building of public monuments, and in a few provisions of the fundamental law—such as the protection for copyright. Though they would not let James Madison have his National University, even with George Washington's support for the plan, none of the Framers objected when Madison wrote in *Federalist* 49 of "the veneration which time bestows on everything and without which the wisest and freest governments would not possess the requisite stability." Philosophical arguments concerning the "best possible city," he continued, could not take the place of common memory in giving a government the legitimate authority that reason alone never bestows. Examples, both "ancient and numerous," are a necessary sanction for the policies of a government in a Republic so "large and various."

A 1987 dramatic presentation of the Great Convention in Philadelphia on PBS, sponsored by both of the National Endowments, could be supported by a powerful argument from circumstance as a legitimate federal function. It would strengthen the public virtue and could be reshowed at regular intervals as a correction upon the follies of the federal judiciary and the legislative presumptions against the national identity for which the other two branches of the general government are frequently responsible in this age of democratic dogma.

intellectual context of 1965 when the Endowments came into being, some symbolic gesture was needed to specify that not all learning is quantification nor all art talking robots. Furthermore, changes in the United States tax code had made it unlikely that private philanthropy would ever again create the equivalent of the Folger Shakespeare Library, a Huntington Library, a Newberry Library, or a Mellon Museum. Recent suggestions by the Presidential Task Force on the Arts and Humanities that the tax laws be revised once again to foster private support for arts and letters is a step toward restoring the historic relationship between these interests and the private sector. But the inducement of a nucleus of federal seed money to draw foundation grants and private gifts into a combined support of worthy projects will be essential during the foreseeable future.

The last of my rationales for federal support for the arts and humanities is the most difficult to explain to the culturally uninitiated. Even so, Americans of all backgrounds and levels of education know that something is wrong if we neglect in the cultural fields our role as leaders and preservers of Western civilization: wrong if we fail to preserve and promote the finest products of the human reason and imagination and the best discussion of these books and artifacts. As Russell Kirk has argued persuasively in his *The Roots of American Order*, it is impossible to understand or appreciate the evidences of American civilization apart from the longer

stream of human experience of which it is a component. What I am talking about in this instance sounds a bit like the questionable logic of the ancient Jews in their prayer for a king: because other nations cherish these good things and prosper as a result of them, why should we be so backward and therefore deprived of the benefits which their presence might bring?

Though the appeal to cultural nationalism has always made its contribution to the apology for arts and letters within the Republic, it is not to my present point. Art and learning are never simply national phenomena. They are always part of a continuum with an ancestry that is antecedent to a particular regime and a posterity that may outlive it regardless of its origins in a particular place and time. As Professor Ronald Berman has argued recently in *Annals of Scholarship*, they are "self-justifying" and part of what we mean by "civilized" in a way that technology can never be. They foster intelligence and a sense of the forms which mirror to us the hidden structure of the human condition but are not directly instrumental or therapeutic. The National Endowments should therefore serve *the arts and humanities*, not their audience or their custodians. They must look backward in order to look forward if they are to see to it that the universe of discourse inhabited by our national leadership, within which our national decisions are made, is not so dominated by what Matthew Arnold called the "Barbarians" (the men of power) or the "Philistines" (the men of business) that the funded wisdom of the race is ignored in either our public or private lives. This performance of their traditional roles is possible if the Endowments are careful about their mandate, if they avoid preachment and politicization.

What I have to say next has more to do with the NEH than with its sister organization devoted to the arts, though it has obvious applications there which I do not have scope to pursue. Humane learning, as defined in the work to which I allude in my title (Arnold's 1869 manifesto, *Culture and Anarchy*) has always been particularly important in Western civilization to the *political life of free societies*. From the beginning, the humanist has emphasized the impact of free choice on man's life—choice made either out of habit or in folly or after due deliberation—and has pointed out also the consequences of such choice. At its best, humane letters has been respectful of ontological and historical limitation, boundaries, and has been immune to the related simplifications of cosmic fatalism and behavioral reductionism—attitudes which have no place in the humanities per se. Therefore, in a Republic where citizens must decide and leaders explain, the central core of humanistic studies is the grammar of the scholar in languages, the chronicle and biography of the historian, and the persuasive arts of the rhetor. These, rather than the definitions of the philosopher, the visions of the poet, or the shalt-nots of the prophet, have been the foundations of liberal learning in all higher civilizations, a sheet anchor that holds steady against the "Bentha-

mites" and the "Jacobins"—Arnold's enemies of culture and the harbingers of anarchy in his time. Following the passage of the Reform Bill in 1867, his argument was really culture *or* anarchy—a choice—since he could see no other alternatives for England's leadership. No one knew better than he that the humanities are in one sense aristocratic. No one in his generation understood more clearly that their influence must be widely distributed if the bonds of a civil society are to hold under the pressures of democracy. No one contended with greater force that, though culture can liberate, its basic character is to preserve, build upon, and spread: is, in brief, both accumulative and conservative. We would do well to heed his admonition in considering the future rule of our National Endowments. That is, if we do not wish to be impaled on the horns of his dilemma and forever deprived of "sweetness and light."

From the foregoing theoretical statement concerning the National Endowments and the justifications for their existence, I derive a few concluding and positive suggestions for their future administration. First of all, we must cease to define the arts and humanities by our hope of what they may become or by our expectation of their wholesome influence for democracy; and, after recovering some faith in our roles as artists and humanists, return to tradition by defining them as what they are. This shift means, of course, a de-emphasis on "constituency" theory and a re-establishment of evaluative procedures which depend for their authority on the competence and judgment of the finest artists and humanists. The idea of popular "spectacles" in the arts and of "planning" grants in the humanities should be examined with a cold eye. There is a good case to be made for encouragement of promising youthful artists and humanists. However, all programs such as the "Fellowships for College Teachers" (a misleading term, and sometimes referred to as "grants for second-rate scholars") should be eliminated entirely in that they amount to a hidden quota system for minorities of various categories who have shown no academic promise but who have the right politics. All special programs and development grants which reflect "pop" sociology, social-scientific approaches to problem-solving, and literary or historical themes which suggest a position on questions of public policy should be avoided with all possible rigor. Also programs that attempt to imitate the sciences or to merge with them. In general, emphasis on new and experimental approaches to teaching or performance in the humanities and the arts should be reduced. Strict supervision should be exercised over state programs; and Chairmen's Grants should be justified to the respective Councils.

Fellowships for promising humanists, artists, sculptors, novelists, poets, dancers, or musicians may be the money that is best-spent by the Endowments. I suggest a major emphasis be placed on such old-fashioned activities, and on the publication of works of learning too expensive and specialized in nature to find favor with

the university presses without an attached subvention. In sum, all efforts to glamorize what is not glamorous, but only difficult, should be avoided. And the word should be sent forth by those responsible for the leadership and administration of the Endowments that there are limitations on what they can attempt; and that therefore only the finest proposals, the best art, and the most distinguished scholarship as identified by the known standards and accumulated wisdom of the traditions which define such activities can expect support. There will not be more and more federal money for the National Endowments. Therefore, the critical spirit must be set to work in singling out only the best of efforts for encouragement.

During most of his adult life, Matthew Arnold was an inspector of schools, of the largely private institutions which the English call "public" and which until recently were expected to educate England's brightest young men in the liberal learning which prepared them

to hold positions of responsibility in the administration of an empire. These were presided over by men like Thomas Arnold, Matthew Arnold's father, who was the headmaster of Rugby. Of such men, the Victorian critic and poet wrote, "The great men of culture are those who have had a passion for diffusing, for making prevail, for carrying from one end of society to the other, the best knowledge, the best ideas of their time." With a sense of history and a freedom from nostrums, their students might hope to recognize the complexity of particular issues and questions and forestall the march of ideology in England's green and pleasant land. Arnold worked for the British government in holding up a norm of excellence to the English schools and colleges; but neither he nor his father ever imagined that the status of English culture would be finally determined by acts of the state. He wrote to inspire private men to do their part in a public cause. In this also, as in the drawing of certain necessary distinctions, the leadership of the National Endowments should follow his example.

Arts and Humanities in Hillsdale Curriculum are Marked by Fidelity to Tradition and Independence from the State

The Center for Constructive Alternatives seminar held at Hillsdale October 4-8, 1981, was entitled, "Should the Government Subsidize the Arts and Humanities?" Speakers in addition to M. E. Bradford were Ronald Berman, former Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities; Aram Bakshian, Jr., President Reagan's special assistant for cultural affairs; Michael Joyce, who headed last year's Heritage Foundation study on arts and humanities policy for the incoming Administration; Lewis Lapham, editor of *Harper's* for the past six years; Toledo museum director Roger Mandle; European scholar Erik von Keuhnelt-Leddihn; and Edwin Wilson, professor of theater at Hunter College and drama critic of *The Wall Street Journal*.

Several of the speakers also lectured for undergraduate classes and counseled with members of the Hillsdale faculty on the College's drive to further strengthen its arts and humanities curriculum in the 1980s. Hillsdale's Trustees have set the goal of becoming the premier liberal arts college in the United States by the time the institution marks its 150th anniversary in 1994. This will mean progress on several academic fronts to bring them abreast of the outstanding reputation Hillsdale already enjoys in political and economic studies. Independence from government funding and resistance to government control will continue to be the College's policy on all fronts, of course, making Hillsdale an object lesson of one answer to the October CCA's question about subsidies to culture or, for that matter, to any other form of private endeavor.

The faculty members who are shaping Hillsdale's arts and humanities policy for the coming decade, Academic Dean John Muller and Division Chairman James King, stress the determination of the College to take the lead in reasserting the value of classical standards and models in an era when most institutions have abandoned these in quest of relevance and contemporaneity.

"Our goal is to be a forum where innovations in the arts can be critically examined and tested in terms of the past," explains Dr. King. "To achieve this, we are re-examining and upgrading the content of our Humanities core requirements (Great Books; Philosophy; and Music, Art; and Theatre Appreciation), recruiting faculty in these areas who are dynamic advocates of tradition, and planning to expand Hillsdale's facilities for the fine arts, beginning with an auditorium for musical and theatrical productions." Tentative plans call for a 400-seat hall including adequate rehearsal space, full video facilities, and an art gallery.

Hillsdale College is determined, in Dr. Bradford's words to the recent CCA seminar, not to "neglect in the cultural fields our role as leaders and preservers of Western civilization," but rather to "preserve and promote the finest products of the human reason and imagination" for our students and our community of friends nationwide.



Hillsdale College is marked by its strong independence and its emphasis on academic excellence. It holds that the traditional values of Western civilization, especially including the free society of responsible individuals, are worthy of defense. In maintaining these values, the college has remained independent throughout its 138 years, neither soliciting nor accepting government funding for its operations.

The opinions expressed in *Imprimis* may be, but are not necessarily, the views of the Center for Constructive Alternatives, the Shavano Institute, or Hillsdale College. Copyright © 1982 by Hillsdale College. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided customary credit is given. ISSN 0277-8432. Editor, John K. Andrews, Jr.